

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF ROSCOMMON COUNTY COUNCIL HELD IN THE COUNCIL Chamber - Áras an Chontae, ON FRIDAY, 6th January, 2017 FOLLOWING THE COMPLETION OF THE MONTHLY MEETING.**

- PRESENT:** Councillor Tony Ward, Cathaoirleach **PRESIDED**
- MEMBERS:** Cllr V. Byrne, Cllr L. Callaghan, Cllr I. Connaughton, Cllr M. Creaton, Cllr N. Dineen, Cllr R. Doherty, Cllr L. Fallon, Cllr P. Fitzmaurice, Cllr J. Keogh, Cllr P. Kilduff, Cllr O. Leyden, Cllr M. Mulligan, Cllr J. Murphy, Cllr J. Naughten and Cllr K. Shanagher.
- OFFICIALS:** Patricia Bohan, Meetings Administrator  
Derek Caldbeck, A/Director of Services  
Eugene Cummins, Chief Executive
- Apologies:** Cllr D. Connolly and Cllr J. Cummins.

**1.1 USE OF ABBEYFIELD HOTEL, BALLAGHADERREEN AS AN EMERGENCY RECEPTION AND ORIENTATION CENTRE (EROC) FOR A PERIOD OF 2 YEARS TO ACCOMMODATE RELOCATED ASYLUM SEEKERS.**

Cathaoirleach Tony Ward welcomed all of the members and thanked them for their attendance at short notice. The purpose of the Special Meeting is for the Department of Justice officials to make a presentation and answer questions regarding the announcement yesterday (5<sup>th</sup> January) to open an Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre (EROC) at the Abbeyfield Hotel in Ballaghaderreen. The development forms part of the Governments response to the Syrian crisis.

Mr. John Roycroft, Programme Director with the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) and Mr. Eugene Banks, Principal Officer with the Reception and Integration Agency attended the meeting.

Mr. Roycroft presented a Briefing Note to the members to outline the programme and the opening of the EROC in Ballaghaderreen:

- The Government has pledged to accept a total of 4,000 persons into the State under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). The context of the crisis is as a consequence of the war in Syria and broader conflict in Middle East.
- Those destined for the new EROC in Roscommon will be asylum seekers coming via Greece/Italy route. They are expected to receive a grant of protection within 8-12 weeks and their stay in EROC is intended to be short term after which they will be housed somewhere in Ireland.
- The main function of an EROC is to provide for basic needs of the residents and an intense range of support services. The hearing for their claim for refugee status will take place within 10-12 week period and during this time they are provided with full bed and board, access to English Language training and a range of other services. A suitable community in which they will be permanently resettled will be found as soon as possible thereafter.
- The Department of Justice sought Expressions of Interest in October 2015 to identify potential properties to facilitate EROCs. Of the 90 responses, after short listing, 14 emerged as having potential to be suitable however the selection process was suspended during 2016 as the numbers

ready to come were lower than anticipated due to operational reasons in Greece.

- The shortlist was re-examined in late 2016 when the numbers for relocation increased and the Abbeyfield Hotel in Ballaghaderreen was identified as the only one that could be operational as an EROC to meet demand in early 2017.
- Ballaghaderreen was shortlisted and deemed suitable for a number of reasons including capacity, potential for services, proximity to schools, medical needs, public transport, potential benefits to local commerce etc.
- Migrants are expected to reside in an EROC for a period of up to 6 months while awaiting determination on refugee status and allocation of a permanent housing solution which is a nationwide strategy.
- The EROC will not be open to the public as is considered best international practice. A “Friends of the Centre” group will be established to coordinate providing assistance to deliver local voluntary support services.
- The full range of state services will be provided at the centre or in the town and every effort is made to mainstream services with local populations while not impacting on delivery of local services.
- The EROC provides full board and accommodation.

Mr. Roycroft expanded on the briefing note as follows:

- The migrants had homes, jobs etc in Syria and are now are coming from camps in Greece where they literally have nothing. This will be a slow gradual process to integrate them into a new life. Those coming to Ireland are expected to be predominantly families with young children.
- When permanently settled in the community, supports through the Local Authorities will be funded by the Department of Justice for up to 1 year.
- He had visited Greece shortly before Christmas and met many of those who will be coming to Ireland. Members of an Garda Síochána also carry out security vetting before the refugees leave Greece for Ireland. These are all war refugees and the IRPP are satisfied that there is no security risk in as far as they can be.
- It is expected that the group will have their status here status confirmed within 12 weeks.
- 80 refugees are expected to arrive next month and 240 in total will come to Ballaghaderreen over the two year period.

Mr. Eugene Banks of the Reception and Integration Agency addressed the members:

- Welcome the opportunity to address questions and concerns of members and welcome the media to the meeting.
- This is the fourth EROC that has been opened in Ireland and all had some hiccups initially that were addressed and have been learned from. No problems encountered are insurmountable.
- Offers of local support need to be targeted and managed and this will be done through the ‘Friends of the Centre’ group.

The members were then asked by the Cathaoirleach to put their questions to the officials and priority would be given to the members of the Boyle Municipal District.

The following points were raised by the Boyle MD members:

- All members thanked the officials for their attendance at the meeting and presentation.
- All of the members expressed their concern for the plight of the refugees and harrowing

experiences they have suffered. The people of Ireland have never been found wanting with regard to help for refugees and Roscommon will be no different.

- Members were very disappointed that there was no prior notice of the announcement. It came as a shock to the local representatives and the Council as well as the local people in Ballaghaderreen. When was the earliest opportunity that the people of the town and the chamber of commerce, the town team schools etc could have been notified that the hotel was to be an EROC facility? The short notice is very frustrating.
- Difficult to believe that local Oireachtas members not aware that this announcement was imminent.
- The programme should have been rolled out in the community over a period of one year.
- If there was an Expression of Interest procedure ongoing since late 2015 and 14 facilities were shortlisted, why then could it not have been made public that Ballaghaderreen was one of the locations shortlisted?
- The officials should make themselves available to meet the people of Ballaghaderreen next week.
- Has Ballaghaderreen the capacity to host an EROC? Why not use the Mayo system for supporting refugees. Unfair to corral everyone into a hotel.
- It is important to welcome the people here and build bridges.
- Are the services required to help these people being put in place before they arrive?
- Is it correct that the refugees will be supported for one year and then handed over to Roscommon county council to support?
- What will happen to the hotel after the two year contract period?
- Mental health services will be a top priority for these people and there are very poor services of this nature already in Roscommon. Ballaghaderreen is also a black spot with regard to ambulance services.
- Is the housing of refugees in hotels best practice as people are shocked at housing homeless in hotels?
- After 6 months of acclimatisation in EROC will the residents remain in the local area and what provisions have been made by Roscommon County Council to house them?
- Childcare services in the county have not yet been notified.
- Is the hotel being redesigned to suit families and will there be security in the centre?

The queries were answered as follows:

- The H.S.E, Department of Social Protection and Department of Education are the principal agencies charged with providing the necessary services to the EROC. The IRPP are in constant discussions with these Departments to provide these services either in house or in the community. The provision of the necessary services is a matter for these individual bodies.
- There are two elements to the project:
  - **Relocation** as in moving the refugees from Greece to Ireland. The High Commission of Refugees recommend a hotel type centre at the outset. This is an EU decision that requires by law that services are provided and not cash.
  - **Resettlement** whereby people are resettled in different countries in permanent homes. It is not anticipated they will be staying permanently in Ballaghaderreen.
- When could people have been informed -this was the first available opportunity as the contract was signed only very recently. There will be interaction with the locals but they will need a period of relaxation and peace before any social interaction is rolled out. It is expected that they will need

- 6 months in an EROC before they are ready to move on.
- Regarding support, in Phase two, when they are settled in a county, the local authority will work with their cohort and be grant aided for a period of one year. The primary concern of the refugees will initially be when can they work and how soon their children can go to school.
- All services will be provided through the EROC while they are there and not the Local Authority.

The Chief Executive, Mr Eugene Cummins then spoke on the matter:

He informed the members that they were the first to know about the announcement after it was communicated to him yesterday. After consultation with the Cathaoirleach, it was agreed to hold a special meeting at the earliest opportunity so that all concerned get the correct information. This development is a good news story and will not take away from the community, but is a means to respond to a desperate situation. This is a chance for the refugees to settle and have a few months of peace and rest before they are settled in communities around the country. There is no cost to Roscommon County Council and our input is fairly small. Any information that becomes available will be disseminated via agreed mechanisms in place.

Further contributions were made by the members as follows:

- What is the breakdown and make up of cohort arriving?
- Will there be extra services for health requirements including mental health services and GPs? It is the view of members that the appropriate services should be in place before they arrive.
- Is planning permission required for change of use from hotel to reception centre?
- The refugees that came to Athlone previously are still in mobile homes.
- The people who own the hotel bought it last year and are from Cork. The company also bought the 52 houses adjacent to the hotel i.e. River Oaks. Will these houses be used for the refugees?
- There are valid reasons for negativity in so far as the county has been let down with regards to provision of vital health services by the HSE. Is the Department of Justice confident that all Departments involved will provide the services required?
- There should be a specific fund set aside to finance the extra services required because it could impact on the current local service.
- The people of Ballaghaderreen were looking forward to the reopening of their hotel. It is seen a very important for tourism in this area due to its proximity to Knock airport. This is a huge disappointment to them.
- The Galway/Roscommon ETB were not informed of the opening of the EROC and what resourced will be required of them.
- If a number of the refugees cannot adjust and are still highly traumatised in 2 years time, what will happen to them?
- Will there be monitoring of the Wi-Fi activity in the hotel as individuals can slip through the net?
- The Department should learn a lesson from this situation and ensure to engage the locals in the future when the next EROC is opened.
- Is there a possibility that this hotel could be used for long term asylum seekers when the two year period is up?
- Will the children attend the local National School?
- Food and services should be sourced locally to benefit the local economy.
- What can Roscommon County Council do to help?

- All agencies that will be involved should call a special meeting to inform locals.
- Will all those attending the 'Friends of the Centre' group be Garda vetted as is mandatory when dealing with children?

Mr. Roycroft and Mr. Banks addressed the queries as follows:


- The asylum seekers in Athlone were in a different programme and there is refurbishment works taking place to their accommodation at present.
- Although their Department cannot speak for other Departments, to date the necessary services have been delivered by those Departments in other EROC facilities.
- The Irish Refugee Protection Programme is very hands on and if there is a problem with the supply of services with another Department, they will step in immediately. They will meet with the refugees weekly. There are interpretative facilities available.
- The contract is for the hotel and adjacent apartments only. They will be using the apartments as they are ideal as family accommodation but these are within the compound of the hotel. They have no knowledge of the River Oaks housing estate or any relationship with the hotel. The contract is covers the arrival of 200 persons over a 2 year period only.
- Most of the family units are quite small with the largest a family of 10. There are some single men but they account for approx 20% of the total number.
- There is no planning issue with a hotel being used as an EROC. A Statutory Instrument was passed last year to allow for this situation and declaring it exempted development.
- Everyone who works in the hotel, or visits the centre must be Garda vetted.
- It is expected that like the running of any hotel, there will have to be a certain amount of local suppliers involved.
- There are two grounds on which refugees can be rejected – law and order and National security. Ireland's preference is to take in families. The refugees go through a very intensive Garda vetting process and are screened and fingerprinted – if they are not happy they will not be accepted to travel.
- Before the refugees leave to come to Ireland the IRPP will have made contact with the HSE. Most of their health conditions are quite mild. There is a very competent team in Athens conducting all of these checks.
- In respect of the timeframe in looking for work – it will take approx 9 months to regularise those coming from Lebanon but only 12 weeks for those coming from Greece. These refugees are from Greece.
- As regard lack of local consultation – the procurement of an EROC is done through a Public Procurement process and they were not in a position to give information until the contract was signed. In an ideal world there would be consultation but the IRPP had to get the refugees here as quickly as possible once they were cleared. They definitely want to work with the local communities. There will be initial problems but the Department will be able to deal with them.

The Cathaoirleach Tony Ward thanked everyone once again for their attendance at such short notice and it was very important that such a meeting take place as quickly as possible. He hoped that the information received from the Department will allay concerns of the members on behalf of their constituents.

**This concluded the business of the Special Meeting.**

**The foregoing Minutes are Confirmed and Signed:**

Petrazio Bohon  
Meetings Administrator

  
Cathaoirleach

Petrazio Bohon  
Countersigned